

Officials doubt flu terror attack

Homeland Security holds avian flu workshop in Fresno.

By Barbara Anderson / The Fresno Bee

If avian flu reaches California, most likely it will be a natural phenomenon and not a terrorist event, state emergency officials said Thursday in Fresno.

The Office of Homeland Security sponsored a workshop Thursday in Fresno to coordinate a defense plan.

The arrival of the deadly bird flu would require an "all-hazards" approach to contain and control it, said Matt Bettenhausen, the state's Homeland Security director.

"Whether it's a natural-occurring disease such as West Nile [virus] ... we also know there's a potential for criminal acts of man," Bettenhausen said. "And we need to make sure we're capable of responding."

The avian influenza could enter California on the wings of migrating birds, the shoes of travelers or in smuggled poultry, birds or meat products, said Dr. Richard E. Breitmeyer, state veterinarian and a participant at Thursday's avian flu workshop.

By whatever means it should arrive in California, the state needs to be ready for the avian flu, Bettenhausen said.

The avian flu preparedness workshop at the Fresno Convention Center was the second organized by Homeland Security in California. Last December, food and agriculture, poultry and veterinary leaders met in Modesto to discuss the potential impacts to poultry and humans of an avian influenza outbreak.

Fresno was a fitting place to hold an avian flu conference, said A.G. Kawamura, secretary of the California Department of Food and Agriculture and a conference participant. "This is where the core of the poultry for the state is," he said.

The deadly bird flu H5N1 strain has ravaged poultry, especially chickens, in more than 30 countries. The virus usually does not infect humans, but more than 200 people have died since 1997. No cases of the bird flu have been reported in the United States.

Most of the people infected had close, direct contact with infected chickens or other birds, but researchers worry the H5N1 virus might mutate, allowing the disease to spread easily from person to person.

Part of the state's avian flu preparedness includes monitoring migratory wild birds, said Pamela Swift, associate wildlife veterinarian with the California Department of Fish and Game.

California has identified eight to 10 bird species to sample for avian influenza, she said.

Surveillance also includes keeping tabs on dead wild birds.

The public can report the deaths of wild birds, such as sparrows and finches, by using the West Nile virus dead-bird hotline, Swift said. Fish and Game also is creating a database to track reported bird deaths.

But the public shouldn't overreact, she said after a news conference Thursday. Avian influenza could arrive by means other than from migrating wild birds. "The role that wild birds are playing in the movement of this virus is unclear," she said.

And while federal, state, county and local officials are preparing for the potential of an avian flu outbreak in California, Bettenhausen said he had a message for the public: "Don't panic."

"The food supply is not going to not be safe," he said.